Interview TICKET

A Silver Jubilee (Of Sorts)

Christine Jorgensen

Photos/Sandy Kaldan

Christine Jorgensen: warm, witty, wise and very critical of American oo-la-la attitudes that overrate sex.

by David Galligan

DECEMBER 1, 1952, George Jorgensen vanished, never to return again. There are newspaper photos of George—a slight blond man with delicate features smiling out of a front page.

And in his place Christine Jorgensen: the original, the most famous transsexual of our time. Happy birthday dear Christine, happy birthday to you! 26 years old or 52, depending on where you're counting from.

Christine Jorgensen—born out of George—taps a long, Carlton menthol green on a side table in the sun-speckled lanai of her just-sold house in Laguna Niguel. A lighter flares; she adjusts her silver framed sunglasses and wets her lips. She looks good; a lei of pearls runs from her throat down over the lime-green, silk lounging pajamas. There are sandals on the feet, gold hoops in the ears, big clunky rings on the fingers. "Oh yes," she says in a voice like Bankhead, "I've been engaged twice. This is my first engagement ring [she holds up a pinkie], the little one—the more I look at it, the more I think that's why I didn't marry him." A pause for an inhale. One of Christine's eyebrows motions to the ceiling. "I added the emeralds," she says, followed by a husky laugh.

Christine remembers it all: the return home from Denmark, a once man transformed into a now woman looking out the plane window at a mob of press. "The Countess Alexandra of Rosenborg had come over on the same plane with her husband; I thought it was for them. When I got off I realized all the hysteria was for me. It was very nerve-racking, but I thought I've climbed my mountain, that this was to be my life. I haven't been afraid of publicity and so forth. I didn't always like it, but I haven't been afraid of it. I was afraid of people for a while because I was grabbed, my clothes were practically torn off and my hair pulled out. During that hysterical period people wanted to grab, and I discovered that people *en masse* are a mob. If one person makes a grab, the others all follow. Fortunately, it's changed for me over the years. It's simmered down to a small roar. I had a couple of years and it was bad enough. I was big in nightclubs. I worked but I haven't ever been a superstar—nor would I want to be. Never. I was just a big gee-whiz moment."

Christine stubs out her cigarette and lights a Benson / Hedges. "There was a psychiatrist involved in my case but he was mostly involved to see if I knew what was happening. When the story broke he became very concerned about my equilibrium. He called me when I was in the hospital. I heard his voice at the other end: 'Chris, are you all right?' I realized he was concerned for me because of the news story. I said, 'Don't worry. All hell is breaking loose but I can tell you one thing, I'm not having a nervous breakdown about it.' He thought maybe the pressure of the press would be too much for me."

That must have been an incredible thrust to go from an introverted young man to a world-renowned figure.

"Editors and publishers said that I had received more newspaper print than any other single person in the history of newspapers. This is pretty startling to think about—there are so many more important things in this world—but of course anything to do with human sexuality automatically is newsworthy. That's why the Kinsey Report a while back was so shocking. People were reading it like a novel. It wasn't—it was statistics. Everyone found out that everyone else was doing exactly what they thought they'd invented.

"I had been introverted because I was worried about what the world thought of me. It took me a couple of years to get over that. When I first appeared in nightclubs, I wouldn't play with the audiences. I didn't let them come close to me at all. In later years I did. I went back to it last October for the first time in 15 years. I appeared at the Grand Hotel in Disneyland. I'm going to Australia with my act after Christmas. Why not go back? I have a good time. After all, if Ann-Margret can do it, so can I. I don't want to go into it heavily—I don't want to play Dubuque, Iowa. I don't want to be unkind to Dubuque, but it's not one of the most scintillating cities in the world."

She takes a sip of coffee.

As a man she wouldn't have been termed a homosexual, would she?

"No," she says, taking off her sunglasses and letting her green eyes adjust to the light. "It's a different way of thinking. The average homosexual wouldn't ever consider surgery of any kind; they have a tremendous castration syndrome—fantastic. Homosexuals like their relationships as they are. A homosexual does not identify himself as a woman; he identifies himself as a male who happens to like other males. Therefore, if you suggested surgery the homosexual would say *no*. In fact there's a possibility that he might be too much in love with his own sex organs. One doesn't know."

On discussing sex, Christine decides "that it is one of the most highly overrated things." Why? "Because," she replies, "I think people devote too much time to it. I think its important in life, but I don't believe in the Freudian theory that everything in life has to do with sex."

Does she think that's an American attitude?

"I think the oo-la-la attitude about sex is certainly American. We were born into this world by Puritans who came over here to escape religious persecution and then created their own. Only Americans identify sex with bathroom. If a man accidently walks into a ladies' room, everybody giggles. A toilet's a toilet; I don't see any sexual connotation. Like with *All in the Family*: there's someone always in the 'terlit,' and you always hear the flush and everybody laughs. The flushing of a toilet is not particularly funny. It shows an immature tweety-tweety-giggle-giggle attitude. I'm hoping that this next generation has changed things considerably. I meet them on the lecture circuit."

Does she find it odd that she has a homosexual following?

"No, I don't think so," she says. "I think it's gender orientation. I think homosexuals still feel terribly suppressed—and they are. And I, being a part of a minority—actually much more of a minority—they assume there's an affinity there. And indeed there is, because I get along greatly with a lot of the homosexuals, both male and female. They're great, great friends.

"I was speaking with Troy Perry at the Coalition of Human Rights. He told me the percentage of homosexuals is the highest minority next to blacks. That's a very movable force. I told him that if the opposition's not careful, they're going to have a revolution on their hands. You cannot take away the rights of the people without something going on. It's too large an issue."

More cigarettes and more coffee; Christine changes subjects as often as cigarette brands.

"It's very hard to tell people what the difference is between transsexuality and homosexuality. It's almost impossible to tell these same people that homosexuals are not child molesters. Heterosexuals don't like to admit that child molestation occurs in their own families on a heterosexual basis."

On dating: "It was quite awkward at first. I think I went through at the age of 26 what the average girl goes through at 16, 17 or 18. I went through that 'Does he like me, is my hair straight, is my makeup on right?' I guess I just had a late puberty."

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On past romances: "It wasn't my nature to keep them under wraps—I couldn't lie about 26 years of my life. That's all part of me. I have pictures of me around from before. I couldn't invent a whole new early life. It takes a special kind of man not to be insecure in his masculinity. If they're insecure in their masculinity, I terrorize them. I always did and I always will. If they have to flex their muscles and prove they're men—if that's their object in life, they're probably very dull conversationalists."

On ovarian transplants: "It could be done now, but the body rejects implanting. Let's face it: we hate to admit it, but our sex organs are not major organs. We can live very well without them. Once they overcome the rejection factor we'll each have our own little orangutan—we'll have liver, kidneys, veins and arteries transplanted. They could even begin in my lifetime."

On the possibility of the transsexual conceiving a child: "Yes, it could happen—conceivably [she laughs]. But then the transsexual child would not be the genetic structure of the parent. It would be the genetic structure of the ovarian egg that was put in. I don't think it's quite necessary as far as I'm concerned. I function as a female. The only thing I can't do is have children, just like a lot of women who have hysterectomies. And the world is certainly overpopulated now, which is a pro-point for homosexuality. I can achieve orgasm. I have never felt the need to have the fruit of my own body. I think that's very egotistical."

Advice to the prospective transsexual: "There are over 40 gender identity clinics in the United States, and those are the best places to go. To come to me for information that changes from week to week would be ridiculous. The clinics are set up for programming psychiatric evaluation. That's the proper approach. The hysterical approach does not work because no doctor is going to perform the operation unless you go to a gender identity clinic and find out who you are and whether you really are a transsexual."

On S&M: "I didn't realize S&M was so prevalent. I don't quite understand people wanting to be beaten up. I suppose I have some hangups, but I don't think I have any radical ones like wanting sex hanging from a chandelier. Although I don't think I'd be adverse to trying anything except being beaten up. I don't think I have any fetishes for objects or rubber or cloth or black panties."

On gay transsexuals: "I've met transsexuals that knew before they had the surgery that they were going to become lesbians. They said they didn't inform the doctor because he wouldn't have performed the operation. These male transsexuals did not feel male towards a female. They felt female towards a female."

On transvestites versus transsexuals: "First of all you must know all human beings are both sexes to some degree; 80/20 is the highest you can be. A transvestite is a person that is very close to the 80/20 biological position. They want to wear the clothes of the opposite sex, but they don't want to be transsexual. Eighty-five to 90 per cent of transvestites are heterosexual. They don't want to be transsexual; they want to go to bed with a woman physically, sexually."

On the film of her life; *The Christine Jorgensen Story*: "I'm missing moneys owed me—I own 10 per cent of the picture. I've never seen a dime. I don't know where the money has been spent. They think they're going to get away with it. It's creative bookkeeping. We have a $20 million suit against the estate of the producer, Edward Small—Edward Small Productions and United Artists."

On Canary Conn: "I did a television show with Canary. I didn't like her attitude, which was because I'm a transsexual I can't expect to be happy in life. Well, no surgery in the world is going to make you happy. It may put you in a better framework to make yourself happy."

On Renee Richards: "I've never met her. I think she lives in Newport Beach. People ask me that and I say, 'Listen. You know, we don't have a convention of transsexuals.' I'm not going to call up and say, 'Hi Renee—you'll never guess who this is.' We're not exactly like the Shriners."

On gay people: "Freedom of the individual is such an important thing in this era, but I would say cool it; don't scream and carry on and wear a ring in your nose. That isn't what homosexuality is all about. Freedom of choice in a sexual act is one thing, but freedom to scream in hotel lobbies and the street is disturbing the peace whether you're heterosexual or homosexual. I think that's the whole point of the movement. Don't be way-out and weird; the movement doesn't need it. Anyone who wants to be one of those is hindering the movement. Cool it, be determined and dignified."

At the door, Christine is talking about a new book she is writing. It will be much more personal than her autobiography. And of course the future—perhaps a musical. "*Mame*," she said quietly. "I've always wanted to sing 'If He Walked into My Life.'"

As I leave her, she is standing on her front steps. The fog is drifting over the hills of Laguna. Christine Jorgensen is singing "If that boy with a bugle walked into my life today" at the top of her lungs. ●